DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 610 CS 502 870

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TITLE Serving New Audiences through an External Degree Program.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 10-12, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bachelors Degrees; *Career Development; College Credits; *Correspondence Study; Education Work Relationship; *External Degree Programs; Higher Education; *Independent Study; Individualized Instruction; Mastery Learning; Nontraditional Education; Program Descriptions

ABSTRACT

An individualized, undergraduate degree program at Central Michigan University offers a variety of instruction options to students whose career and personal circumstances limit their access to more traditional forms of higher education. The program, sponsored by the university's Institute for Personal and Career Development, is designed to accept transfer credit for previous relevant academic experiences, award credit for relevant career/life experiences, allow students to earn credit away from campus and by examination, offer a number of unique learning devices and delivery systems, and provide academic advisers who can assist students in constructing academic programs that fit. Individualized credit earning options include such activities as planning and implementing an academic program, preparing an experiential learning portfolio that contains descriptions and documentation of learning achieved through work or life experiences, mastering learning package courses, designing student initiated planned experiences, participating in arranging independent studies, and taking correspondence courses. The program is characterized by students working closely with academic resource persons, receiving relatively quick feedback and reinforcement, and being graded on the basis of having mastered learning objectives. (AEA)

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SERVING NEW AUDIENCES THROUGH AN EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAM

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Since its establishment in 1971 by Central Michigan University, the Institute for Personal and Career Development has served individuals whose career and personal circumstances limit their access to the more traditionally organized forms of higher education. In this endeavor, the Institute combines Central Michigan's high academic standards with innovative teaching technologies; draws its faculty from a variety of educational institutions, business organizations, medical establishments, and governmental agencies; and attempts to offer courses wherever and whenever students are able to take them. The courses and degree programs, both graduate and undergraduate, build upon the student's knowledge, ability, interests, and work and life experiences through an individualized approach to advising, instruction, and career planning.

The Individualized Degree Program

The Institute has served groups of individuals affiliated with a corporation, governmental agency, or some other organization which functions as a sponsor. Five years ago, the Individualized Degree Program was created to extend the Institute's scope beyond the individual who is a member of a sponsored group to the individual who is isolated from traditional educational opportunities and who desires personal enrichment and/or career development.

At present, more than six hundred adult students are enrolled in one of the undergraduate individualized degree programs. To date, more than 100 have graduated. These individuals include housewives, the self-employed, employees of a wide variety of business, medical and government organizations, incarcerated individuals, and those whose jobs require extensive travel.

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The students are dispersed across half of Michigan's counties with a small number in nearby Canada and outside of Michigan. Where there are clusters of these students, such as around Flint, Lansing, Alpena, Traverse City, Petoskey and Ionia (where three prisons are served), efforts are made to establish informal learning resource centers to provide preadmission counseling and small group instruction.

The Individualized Degree Program offers an undergraduate degree program which is designed to meet the educational needs of these "isolated" individual adults.

1. Transfer credit is accepted for previous academic experiences which are relevant to the degree being pursued.
2. Credit is awarded for relevant career-life experiences.
3. All credit may be earned away from campus--at home, at the place of employment, even on vacation. In fact, the curriculum can be pursued by the student wherever he or she may be located.
4. Credit may be earned by examination.
5. A number of unique learning devices and delivery systems such as video courses and small group instruction as well as more conventional approaches are available.
6. Academic advisors assist the student in constructing the academic program most appropriate to his or her background, needs and aspirations.

Undergraduate degrees are available in Liberal Studies, Management and Supervision, and Community Development. Although specific competencies are required in an area of concentration, the particular form a concentration takes will be determined by the student's individual needs.

Individualized Credit Earning Options

Most of the options for earning credit are varieties of Individualized Instruction.

1. Planning and implementing an academic program is a one-on-one procedure in which student and advisor discuss the student's academic and career objectives, decide upon student academic activities to achieve them, and periodically discuss the degree of success in completing them.

The planning process is an important step toward the completion of degree requirements. It results in the formal development of a plan which becomes the official Program Guide of the student.

2. Preparation of the Experiential Learning Portfolio. With the guidance of the advisor and a book of instructions, the student prepares descriptions and documentation of college level learning achieved through work, training and other life experiences and activities. Three members of an experiential learning evaluation team (composed of CMU professors) read each portfolio and may assign a limited amount of academic credit.

Experiential learning credits awarded have averaged twenty out of a maximum permissible number of sixty. Students who have graduated so far from the program have received an average of twenty-five credits. A few have actually received the maximum award.

3. Learning Package Courses. Self-instructional courses have been developed and programmed by subject matter specialists, in cooperation with professional instructional developers, so that students may master them at their own pace at home, on the road, or at the office. The courses are criterion based. Student performance is evaluated upon demonstration of mastery of the performance objectives. Before being released for field use

the packages are thoroughly tested on target learners. In field use each student is assigned a subject matter specialist as a personal tutor with whom he communicates by visit, letter, and/or telephone. Students demonstrate mastery of the subject by passing objective, proctored tests at the end of each module.

Student results from two package courses illustrate the effectiveness of this method of instruction.

The upper division level course, Public Relations Techniques, has been taken by more than seventy students, of whom sixty-five percent completed successfully, eighteen percent are currently working on the course, and only seventeen percent failed to complete.

Sixty students have studied the package course, Managerial Finance, of whom sixty seven percent completed successfully, eighteen percent are currently working on the course, and only fifteen percent failed to complete.

4. Planned experiences are student initiated, individualized learning experiences which synthesize the theoretical and the practical in one learning context. Available to individuals or small student groups, the planned experience is a student-formulated project on an approved topic (or topics) in the student's area of study. Projects are formulated with the assistance of an advisor, approved by an evaluation committee, and supervised by a competent practitioner-level monitor who also renders the grade.

An example of a planned experience for one credit hour in public speaking is the preparation of a half hour lecture and a half hour question and answer session live in front of nine hundred people and broadcast over a radio station with a listening audience of four thousand. The student spoke on tropical plant care and provided a tape of the lecture for evaluation.

An example of two consecutive planned experiences for twelve credit hours each in industrial technology is first, the assessment and development of limestone reserves at Presque Isle, Michigan, which included a detailed fifteen year mining plan and a capital equipment requirement schedule and second, the design of a limestone processing plant having the capacity of producing and shipping annually 3.5 million net tons.

5. Independent studies are courses arranged by professors, in cooperation with students, on an individualized basis covering subjects and materials not otherwise available. They range in credit hours from one to six. An example of an independent study for six credit hours in the field of management is the reading of ten books on the subject and the writing of a summary and critique of each.

6. Correspondence courses are University courses offered on an individualized basis in areas where programmed package courses have not been developed.

While these courses were not developed with the sophistication of the learning package courses (they usually involve a printed work book, manual and text), their completion rates are roughly the same as that of the packages. For example, a popular introduction to sociology course has been taken in correspondence format by forty-one students. To date, twenty-seven, or slightly more than sixty-five percent, have completed the course.

Unlike the learning packages, where tests are proctored and graded where the students take them, correspondence courses present a considerable disadvantage to students studying on an individualized, distance learning basis. Mastery examinations must be mailed to a campus based instructor for grading and feedback. Thus, protracted delays can interrupt and slowdown the students' self-pacing and need for fast feedback.

Summary. Characteristics common to all of the seemingly disparate varieties of personalized instruction discussed here include:

(1) the concept of mastery of learning goals by students,

(2) working closely with academic resource persons (including academic advisor, tutors, mentors and proctors),

(3) receiving relatively quick feedback and reinforcement, and

(4) being graded on the basis of having mastered objectives mutually agreed on by student and resource person.

In the five years of Individualized Degree Program existence, such instruction has not only proven popular in general, but indispensible, as well, to the many adults who for geographic, economic or personal reasons cannot pursue a more traditional, on-campus degree program. The evidence, so far, indicates both that a need is being met and students are doing well academically. In the meantime, our efforts are being directed toward greater use of technology in education. We are especially interested in uses of cable television and the teleconferencing techniques to provide expanded course opportunities to our distant learners.